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SoPHIA social platform: a new community of practice

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5. SoPHIA SOCIAL PLATFORM: A NEW COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE*

The term «social platform» is widely used as a synonym of the term «social media platform» whereby the word «media» is elided, as in poems where words are sometimes removed from a verse for stylistic reasons. However, unlike with poetry, this elision confuses rather than clarifies the meaning of the term for the reader: «social media platform» refers exclusively to a given technological support to manage any sort of information whatsoever and disseminate it to a wide group of people.

For projects such as SoPHIA, falling under the category of the «social platforms» promoted by the European Union with the support of its Horizon 2020 programme for Research and Innovation, defining the remit of the term has been, from the start, a major challenge; conscious of the stake, the consortium addressed this issue straightforwardly from the project's inception. Indeed, the scope of the call to which SoPHIA responded stated that the social platform had to «bring together the research communities, heritage professionals, public and private actors and policy makers at local, regional, national and international levels concerned with the impact assessment and quality of interventions in historical environment and CH sites in Europe»¹. Against this background, SoPHIA worked to develop a «community of practice» that has served, and has been served by, the many activities foreseen during its life cycle (workshops, conferences, debates, etc.) as well as by a digital tool, the SoPHIA collaborative digital platform, intended to play a supporting function throughout the project's implementation: on the one hand, SoPHIA privileged content development and, on the other, spurred systematic exchange among all the parties it involved, through a varied set of means².

At its core SoPHIA had the development of a holistic impact assessment model of CH interventions as well as the design of a set of guidelines for policy recommendations and for a research agenda. For the

** While the research is the outcome of the joint effort of SoPHIA Consortium, chapter 5 should be attributed to Mercedes Giovinazzo, Antonio Gucciardo, Alberto Cerezo, Claudia Rosignoli, Elia Vlachou and Henrik Zipsane.*

past 25 years, the research community has produced impact assessment models and professionals in the cultural sector have been grappling with how to put such models at use. In most cases, these models have simply transposed to the cultural sector blueprints from other sectors, stressing the relevance of data and quantifiable indicators; they have thus often resulted in frustrating attempts. When questioned about the SoPHIA model, the members of its community of practice supported with enthusiasm the relevance of the proposed model because it approaches the issue from a holistic perspective putting the economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions of sustainable development at its core, and in relation with time and people. However, they also voiced their concern as to the fact that heritage sites are «alive» and that, therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all as regards their evaluation. They also stressed that public authorities and politicians making policy decisions regarding CH tend to be interested in the political short-term impact for their constituencies and are always on the quest for the so-called undisputable elements on which to base a decision whereas evaluating the impact of interventions in CH must not only be about preserving a given heritage site but about ensuring its place and continuity in time for the enjoyment of all; that it must not be only about an economic impact expressed in numbers of visitors or about the increase in GDP through related services but about the place and role of CH in society: a living testimony of the past, it belongs to individuals, communities and peoples and fosters their sense of ownership. Indeed, the challenge lies in conveying a narrative not only in readily understandable language but also in making explicit that it can be transposed into practice, in a way that is feasible.

5.1 *The SoPHIA community of practice*

Initially developed by anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, communities of practice are understood as those groups of people who share a common interest that provides the basis for information- and experience-sharing, thus enabling them to learn from each other and develop personally and professionally (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Indeed, communities of practice are based on balanced communication between its members, as both learners and providers of knowledge. To be successful the communities of practice rely, mainly, on motivation and collaboration among their members.

In the case of SoPHIA, the challenge was to build a community of practice whilst developing the project content and ensuring the delivery of the outputs foreseen: the SoPHIA impact assessment model for use prior, during and after public-funded interventions in urban heritage contexts but, further down along the project timeline, an action plan on the EU future action regarding operational programmes and public policies, and a

research agenda based on the needs identified. This has meant, as mentioned, that the consortium initiated conversations with potential and interested parties – the SoPHIA stakeholders – early on, approaching them with the proposal to take part «in a process» over a two-year period; it did so from a profoundly honest perspective involving them in every step and in various formats: meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences. The pandemic added a further layer of complexity: all the activities aiming at involving stakeholders and bringing them progressively into the community of practice were intended to be «in person» but had to be transferred online. Albeit the initial euphoria because of the sense of security provided by the use of digital tools that ensured maintaining contact and communication, it soon became clear that having to rely exclusively on these means has many and serious drawbacks: from the difficulty of ensuring full, attentive and active participation to people’s saturation with online activities, from the always-increasing frustration of those charged with moderating and conducting to the widespread feeling of being obliged «to be online» without any other option at hand.

SoPHIA’s community of practice is constituted by professionals with different profiles from a range of institutions and organisations: the academia, with professors, researchers, and post-graduate students; public administrations, including policymakers and civil servants; public and private cultural institutions and organisations; networks and NGOs. In the run-up to the project’s end, the consortium concluded that the stakeholders it involved have collectively expressed appreciation as to the importance and relevance of the SoPHIA impact assessment model, have made constructive contributions not only for the finalisation of the model but also as regards the policy recommendations and needs for further research on the issue. But, above all, that they have shown, through practice, that they are willing to undertake ownership of the model and to advocate for its use at local and national levels.

Indeed, it is possible to safely say that SoPHIA has indeed achieved setting-up its community of practice and rolling it out: all its stakeholders have actively partaken in the definition of the impact assessment model as well as in the identification of policy recommendations and research needs. Furthermore, they have all subscribed to the idea that, as regards the impact assessment model, it is not only about it making sense for those well-versed in the subject but, rather, about it serving a wider societal aim: interventions in CH have many implications and countereffects that can, at best, generate a sense of disinterest or, at worst, of alienation by the people and communities that live in a context where heritage interventions are carried out³. This underlying leitmotiv was a priority of the EU call to which SoPHIA responded: citizens must not be disengaged when it comes to heritage but should, rather, feel empowered to take part in the decision-making processes that lead to heritage interventions because, otherwise, the risk of failure is simply too high.

5.2 *The SoPHIA collaborative digital platform and other digital tools*

The SoPHIA community of practice benefitted from the support of a collaborative digital platform for the development and implementation of its activities. Adapted to the specific needs of the project, the consortium chose the eXo software that offers possibilities for communication, collaboration, engagement, and knowledge sharing through an «independent digital workplace solution»⁴. The digital platform was up and running from the very start of the project. Possibly because of the flood of digital options with similar facilities that literally swamped users during the pandemic and because of generational and/or sector-proper attitudes, the SoPHIA collaborative digital platform was not used to its fullest potential; it however served as the repository of information and documentation, providing an archive of shared memory of the project. Indeed, the technological tool served a limited, albeit important, supporting role; this confirms that technology must be used at its fullest potential in the implementation of a project, of this but also of any other nature, but that it can never define it.

Furthermore, to ensure a wide outreach also beyond its community of practice, SoPHIA's website⁵ served as the project's showcase, where all the documents and information generated were made available in open access. The website had a specific tab with the list of all the members of its community of practice, divided into two categories, 9 advisory board members⁶ and 46 stakeholders⁷; all gave their written consent to their inclusion in this list and thus acknowledged their «SoPHIA membership». These numbers might seem relatively modest; however, as happens with quantitative indicators applied for the evaluation of projects such as this one, it is not necessarily only about numbers but, rather, about their quality: the SoPHIA community of practice is part of its legacy.

Finally, SoPHIA released 12 issues of its newsletter, with editorials by both its consortium members but also by its stakeholders. In this regard, the communication and dissemination tasks entailed contacts with other initiatives: SoPHIA was presented at various events and established synergies with other H2020-funded projects thus extending its community of practice⁸.

5.3 *Looking ahead*

As with any Horizon 2020-funded project and, for that matter as with any project whatsoever, it often happens that «projects» somehow take a life of their own and that, as any living organism, they develop and adapt to situations throughout their lifetime. This often entails that sight of the starting point or origin is, if not lost, somewhat blurred. Therefore, it is important to ensure a systematically follow-up without, however, foregoing

the big picture by, whenever necessary, going back to the why, how and what for of the project, giving each of its components its due importance and place.

SoPHIA was a Horizon 2020 «Coordination and support action – CSA». These are defined as «actions consisting primarily of accompanying measures such as standardisation, dissemination, awareness-raising and communication, networking, coordination or support services, policy dialogues and mutual learning exercises and studies...»⁹. As such, SoPHIA encompassed all of the above: work packages were structured to lead one into the other in a systemic approach and each foresaw a series of outputs. Therefore, one of the main challenges for the consortium as regards the SoPHIA community of practice was to lead it through the project in a structured way, to explain the specific moment in time when they were asked to intervene and with what concrete aim: this called for clear and respectful attitudes from all parties involved, acknowledging the importance of balanced communication within the community where everyone is both a learner and provider of knowledge as well as the importance of collaborative processes, also through digital means. Above all, a process such as the one described, is about spurring motivation to actively and constructively participate in it. Moreover, this is based on the understanding that it will not necessarily lead to a concrete, tangible and immediate return on investment during the project life-cycle, but rather, it will generate results in the medium and long term, both in terms of public policies but also in terms of operational opportunities if, and only, everyone involved continues to believe in the relevance of the endeavour and acts for it. The SoPHIA community of practice has contributed to the design of the impact assessment model for quality heritage interventions, of the policy and operational recommendations, and research agenda but it will not see the immediate application of the model, nor will it see the immediate deployment of the policy and operational recommendations, and of the research proposals. This will all happen, at best, sometime in the future. Herein lies the «political» importance of the community of practice: if it has owned the process and its results, its members will individually, sometimes maybe collectively, continue the advocacy tasks that are necessary for the longer-term results to see the light. To provide support in this longer term, some of the project outputs are more important or relevant than others and, to this end, the consortium opted to make the project results visible also with a web-based version¹⁰ of the impact assessment model that can be widely disseminated and used for information, advocacy, and educational purposes also by all the members of its community of practice beyond the project's end. Furthermore, since advocacy actions must be done with accessible and understandable supporting tools, SoPHIA produced a set of digital narratives¹¹ that explain the model in a structured and visually compelling way because, as has been said, it is paramount that the cultural sector takes on the responsibility to make itself clearly understood.

Notes

¹ H2020-SC6-TRANSFORMATIONS-2018-2019-2020, Topic: TRANSFORMATIONS-16-2019, Social platform on the impact assessment and the quality of interventions in European historical environment and cultural heritage sites.

² For a detailed description of the SoPHIA website and online restricted platform completely designed, functional and accessible (SoPHIA, 2020d).

³ These conclusions are inferred from the SoPHIA case study. See: D2.1 Mapping of Impact Assessment Practices in Cultural Heritage (SoPHIA, 2021a).

⁴ <https://www.exoplatform.com/>

⁵ <https://sophiaplatform.eu/en>

⁶ <https://sophiaplatform.eu/en/advisory-board>

⁷ <https://sophiaplatform.eu/en/sophia-stakeholders>. A further 64 stakeholders have been involved in the SoPHIA study cases without being formally engaged in the community of practice.

⁸ For further details see: D5.4 Dissemination and Exploitation Plan (SoPHIA, 2020e).

⁹ HORIZON 2020 – WORK PROGRAMME 2018-2020, General Annexes.

¹⁰ <https://model.sophiaplatform.eu/>

¹¹ <https://model.sophiaplatform.eu/digital-narrative/>